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Campaign revs up to break the driving habit

By Anthony Flint,
GLOBE STAFF

From an office overlooking the gleaming new expensive highway through Boston, state and federal officials had a message yesterday for area drivers: Don't use it.

The Environmental Protection Agency and state officials launched a campaign to try to break Boston area drivers' seemingly intractable reliance on their cars and get them on trains, carpools, ferries, buses, and other alternative means of transportation.

State Transportation Secretary Dan Grabauskas said the goal is to give commuters the means to do "anything but climb into a car."

It won't be easy. According to the EPA, more than 1 million commuters drive into Boston each day, the vast majority of them alone. That's despite the fact that the average Boston-area driver spends 67 hours a year stuck in gridlock, and that the time spent commuting keeps growing, now averaging 54 minutes round trip.

EPA regional administrator Robert W. Varney said that "the wider range of alternatives we have, the better off we'll be."

Yesterday, the agency honored more than 30 companies, universities, and public agencies for providing incentives to workers to share rides, take transit, or ride their bicycles to work. They

applauded Massachusetts General Hospital, Harvard University, Logan Airport, Millennium Pharmaceuticals, and others for providing half-price MBTA passes, providing bike lockers, and rewarding workers who don't drive alone with extra vacation time.

But the event was held at the EPA's offices on top of a 1,865-car parking garage, at the mouth of the new Government Center ramp off the just-opened Big Dig tunnel through downtown. With that kind of parking available off a \$14.6 billion highway, commuters could be forgiven for thinking they have been given plenty of incentive to keep driving.

The contrast underscored the views of many environmentalists that it will take much more than incentive programs. They say real change will result only from massive investment in transit and

development policies that keep workers and workplaces from being so spread out.

But the Big Dig also produced about \$4 billion in transit projects, said Jon Carlisle, spokesman for the state transportation agency. While the highway system is being improved, so are other means of getting to work, he said.

Yet it is unclear whether those projects, including the proposed Greenbush line and commuter rail to New Bedford and Fall River, will happen. In a May 13 letter to the MBTA obtained by the Globe, a US Army Corps of Engineers representative said that agency was "closing the file" on the New Bedford-Fall River rail project, for example, because MBTA officials indicated it was not going forward. But Carlisle said the letter was the result of a misunderstanding and no decisions have been made.

Anthony Flint can be reached at flint@globe.com



Boston. The Environmental Protection Agency and Gov. Mitt Romney launched a campaign yesterday to promote buses, ferries, and other alternative modes of transit around Boston. Decrying the adverse environmental effects of the region's dependence on cars, the campaign challenges commuters to leave their cars at home.